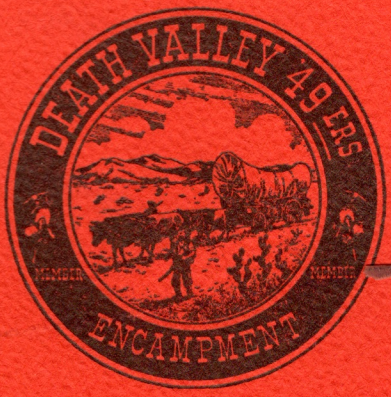
The Eichbaum Toll Road



By MARY DE DECKER

KEEPSAKE NO. 10

Published for the dedication of
THE EICHBAUM TOLL ROAD MONUMENT
DEATH VALLEY '49ers ENCAMPMENT
DEATH VALLEY, CALIFORNIA
NOVEMBER 13, 1970

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H. W. Eichbaum

THE EICHBAUM TOLL ROAD

Adventurer, promoter, man of vision—H. W. "Bob" Eichbaum was all of these. He might have been called a dreamer, his ideas were so often ahead of his time, but he had both the ability and the persistence to turn dreams into reality. His casual acquaintance with Death Valley as a young engineer led him to visualize it as a tourist center. Not only was he impressed by its ideal winter climate and moved by its scenic beauty, but he realized that its awesome reputation could be turned into a favorable asset. Tourism would have come to Death Valley eventually, but it took Bob Eichbaum to make it possible in the 1920's.

The difficulties of traveling in this vast wasteland have been recorded so frequently that there is no need to describe them here. The trials of the '49ers furnished a dramatic introduction. Then came the Wheeler-Lyle expedition of 1871 and Lt. Birnie's more successful trip in 1875. The first was marked by the tragic loss of two experienced guides. These government expeditions were for the purpose of mapping and research, but both reports gave much space to the hardships encountered and the difficulties of travel. Many tales tell of struggle for survival—or the failure to survive—as prospectors combed the great depression and its mountain borders. Each life depended on reaching a spring or desert waterhole within the limits of endurance. Each man was on his own as he and his burros shared the risks of unmapped travel.

Aaron Winters introduced the borax era when he discovered that precious substance in 1880. This led to the first industrial ventures in Death Valley. The successful operation of the Harmony Borax works, and soaring demands for the product, created a desperate need for efficient transporation. The famous 20 Mule Team freighters were born of this necessity. The story of those great wagons, the unbelievable endurance of the drivers and swampers, and the well-trained animals pulling their lumbering loads across the dry, lonely miles to Mojave, is one of the most amazing chapters of

transportation history. It was a short one, however, ending in 1889 when borax activity moved to Borate, near Calico, for a time.

As nearby mining camps boomed, near the turn of the century, there was a new surge of activity in Death Valley. Bullfrog, Rhyolite, and Beatty were population centers east of the valley, and Skidoo overlooked it from southwest of Tucki mountain in the Panamints. Indian trails became well traveled thoroughfares between waterholes, and wagon tracks over the best access routes became roads. One important waterhole, located at a junction of Indian trails east of the sand dunes, became a focal point in the route between Rhyolite and Skidoo. It was a barren, sandy place and there were many times when the life sustaining water was difficult to locate. A passing traveler helpfully placed a couple of lengths of stove pipe at the hole as a marker, and so it became known as "Stovepipe Wells."

Borax came into the picture again when ores at Borate were exhausted. There were changes in names and organization, but here it was always known as the "Borax Company." It continued to play an important role in Death Valley. When the Lila C. Mine, in the Greenwater Range came into operation in 1907, "Borax" Smith planned to freight the ore out by means of a steam tractor pulling huge wagons. A graded road, much like a railroad right-of-way, was built for this purpose. It ran 98 mlies southeasterly from the Lila C. to Ivanpah Station on the Salt Lake Railroad. When this strange train proved impractical on its first run, the Borax Company faced the fact that a railroad was essential. The Tonopah & Tidewater Railroad, subsidized by the Pacific Coast Borax Company, was built from the Santa Fe line at Ludlow to Gold Center, later to Beatty, and a seven mile branch was extended from Death Valley Junction to the Lila C. Although the railroad's main purpose was to freight borax ore, the company was ever alert for any other business.

About that same time, Senator Clark of Montana had invested in a Las Vegas and Tonopah Railroad through Rhyo-

lite, and the Bullfrog and Goldfield Railroad came in from the north. Their frantic rivalry was needless—Rhyolite was on the decline before they arrived. Prior to the railroads, stage lines from Las Vegas had furnished passenger service to the eastern borders of Death Valley.

In 1914 borax activity shifted from the Lila C. to mines actually within the Death Valley basin. A narrow-gauge branch was run to the mining camp at New Ryan, 20 miles from Death Valley Junction, where it operated until 1928. Furnace Creek Inn was built as a result of this venture. It was hoped by the Pacific Coast Borax Company that the resort would help defray its investment in the costly railroad.

So much for the setting for the Eichbaum story.

Herman William Eichbaum was born on Christmas Day, 1878, near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He grew up to be an adventurous young man. After earning a degree in engineering at the University of Virginia, he headed west to make his fortune. Bob, as he was known to his friends, was a person who wanted to be where the action was. It was not suprising that he found his way to Rhyolite during its boom days, and it was typical of Bob Eichbaum that he came up with an idea for improving the place. He and young Bill Ball planned and built the first electric plant in Rhyolite in 1906, when the population of that city was said to be 10,000 people.

While in the vicinity of Death Valley, Eichbaum tried the life of a prospector, using burros to pack into remote canyons. His appreciation of the magnificent scenery and the recreation potential that he saw there may have excited his active mind more than the prospect of gold. This interest in Death Valley was to remain with him for the rest of his life.

By the time Rhyolite died, Bob Eichbaum and Bill Ball were making use of their talents in Southern California at fashionable Catalina Island and the seaside city of Venice. It was at the St. Mark's Hotel in Venice that handsome young Eichbaum was introduced to Helene Neeper, a bay city society girl. They were married October 31, 1914, after a whirlwind courtship.

including quite a few from Death Valley. Local men from various towns came to give testimony favoring the road. There were Pete Smith, Wm. Van Buskirk, G. W. Dow, Dr. M. A. Williamson, and F. B. Leete of Lone Pine, Cash C. Clark of Darwin, M. A. Smith of Keeler, and John W. McMurry and A. G. Barmore of Big Pine. Dr. Williamson supported his arguments with a letter from the Automobile Club of Southern California relative to the distances across Death Valley. The only opposition at this meeting was expressed by J. O. McIntosh of Big Pine, who "pointed out facts that he considered might cause such a road to be a detriment to the county and a menace to the present highway system." This time the supervisors granted Mr. Eichbaum's application by a unanimous vote. They appointed Cash C. Clark and P. W. "Pete" Smith as commissioners to approve the layout of the road. A third commissioner, G. W. Dow, was appointed by Eichbaum.

As Supervisor Hancock said in later years, they began by surveying the route with a telescope. Thus they studied the landscape to estimate the best way over that precipitous mountain wall. Then a party of five men walked over Towne Pass to determine the specific route. These included Eichbaum and County Surveyor B. E. Sherwin, whom Eichbaum had hired to do the surveying. Possibly the other three were the commissioners appointed to approve the layout. It was a strenuous trip and Mr. Sherwin carried his instruments all the way. The man who was to follow with two horses never did catch up with them. Tom Hancock, brother of Supervisor Hancock, and a companion drove a Model-T around by way of Wildrose and Emigrant Springs to meet the survey party. When there was no sign of them by dusk, the waiting men felt some concern. Eventually, lights appeared high on the slope. Tom Hancock headed for them with a canteen of water, an act which was much appreciated by the thirsty party. They had started out with only a small canteen between them. Such was the survey over Towne Pass.

The construction job was all hard work. A Mr. Miller, Eichbaum's right-hand-man, was superintendent over a crew

Helene and Bob Eichbaum, early pioneers and builders in Death Valley.

— Photo Tom Murray Collection

Dedication

TROMBONE PRELUDE . . . . . ELMER D. MILLER

WELCOME . . . . . THOMAS W. MATHEW
President Death Valley '49ers, Inc.

ROBERT MURPHY
Superintendent Death Valley
National Monument

INTRODUCTION OF CHAIRMAN AND CO-CHAIRMAN

DON C. MEADOWS

L. BURR BELDEN

GREETINGS . . . . . HERBERT LONDON
Chairman Inyo County
Board of Supervisors

RUBEN S. AYALA
Chairman San Bernardino County
Board of Supervisors

Program

"LAST BONANZA" . . . . . JOHN W. HILTON

INTRODUCTION OF SPEAKER . . . . . .
MRS. R. R. (HAZEL) HENDERSON

DEDICATORY ADDRESS . MRS. WILLARD (PEG) LEWIS

UNVEILING OF MONUMENT . . . . . .
MRS. TREVOR S. (ELEANOR) POVAH

Friday, November 13, 1970 10:30 A.M.

STOVE PIPE WELLS VILLAGE

Death Valley, California

— Photo Tom Murray Collection

— Photo Rollin Bell Collection

of six to eight men, including a driver, a grader, several rock throwers, and a cook. Few of them stayed throughout the job. Billy Finnemore of Darwin was cook for a time, but when his check was made out to his better known name, "Copperstain Bill," he became indignant and quit. The first road cut was made by a 30-Caterpillar tractor pulling a seven-foot road grader. Then it was widened to a passing width. Rocky outcroppings often determined the width of the road as well as its contour. No blasting was done. As one of the crew described it, they "kinda detoured around" the rough canyon of the present route toward the summit. The work progressed in spite of discouraging delays. About every three miles their army tent camp was moved—there was no preferred campspot. Their Christmas camp was just over the summit of Towne Pass. Water for the project was hauled from Darwin Falls. Gas and oil were delivered by Rollin Bell for the Union Oil Company.

By spring they had reached the dunes on the floor of the valley. It was a simple matter to clear the brush here and even to build the road. Before the job was completed, however, they realized that it would be impossible to stabilize the roadbed because of the constantly shifting sand. Reluctantly, Eichbaum gave up while still four and one-half miles short of his goal. For all practical purposes, the road ended at the sand dunes.

On May 3, 1926, a "Matter of the Viewing and Laying Out of the Death Valley Toll Road" was signed by the three commissioners and filed in the county courthouse. Attached to the document were certified survey sheets describing a right of way 100 feet wide. A certificate of completion, excepting the easterly four and one-half miles, was filed the next day. At the same time, a schedule of toll rates was fixed by the Board of Supervisors. Automobiles would be $2.00 each, with an additional 50 cents for each occupant. Rates for trucks, trailers and wagons were listed according to tonnage. Animals were $1.00 per head. All county officials and their vehicles were to be allowed exemption when on county business.

At last the road was ready for use. One early traveler

referred to it as a "dragged out trail," but by Death Valley standards it was a good road. It was the most costly of all entrances into Death Valley. More important, it provided a direct route from Los Angeles by way of Owens Valley. Limited travel had reached the west side of Death Valley by way of Wildrose and Emigrant Canyon, but it was extremely difficult.

An impressive link in the route to Death Valley was the "Zinc Hill Road," formerly known as the "Skidoo Road," built during the Skidoo boom years. It was constructed by use of mule power and Fresno scrapers, aided by jack-hammers and black powder—an impossible project, accomplished to meet the frantic needs of a mining town. Skidoo had needed fresh fruit, vegetables, and hay from Owens Valley, as well as a closer tie to the county seat. Prior to that time, it had been necessary to go south from Darwin to Millspaugh, over the southerly end of the Argus Range, and down Shepherd Canyon to Panamint Valley—a long and grueling trip. This shortcut from Darwin joined the Eichbaum Road at Whippoorwill Springs.

Turning to plans for his resort, Eichbaum drew many of his ideas from the successful operation at Catalina Island. Modified tent houses would be adequate in the mild winter climate of Death Valley. The walls were to be covered with beaverboard below and screened above, with roll-up canvas awnings. There would be electric lights and running water, music and refinements, scenic tours, and first class service.

Building materials were freighted in over the newly built road. Despite Eichbaum's early dream of a place at the buttes and his later plan for building at Stovepipe Wells, the actual site of his resort was determined by chance. Perhaps he realized by then that one did not push fate too far in Death Valley. At the spot where his solid-tired trucks became stuck in the sand, he unloaded and began construction on the south side of the road. Eventually there were twenty tiny cabins and several larger buildings, supplemented by army tents out in back. A gas pump stood at the edge of the road about where room 66

now stands. The building behind was the office and toll station. (Some of the little guest cabins, behind the present 50's and 60's, are still used for overflow.) Fresh paint and striped awnings made the place attractive by day; electric lights twinkled cheerily at night. A searchlight was mounted on the roof of the central building to throw its beam across the desert. A landscape gardener was brought in to lay out flower beds and to plant Joshua trees along the pathway. Incongruously, a fir tree was placed along the road east of the toll gate before gardening was given up as being hopeless or inappropriate. Later another building was added on the north side of the road to serve as a new lobby, kitchen and dining room. Wings of additional rooms were added still later to cater to the more sophisticated travelers who liked solid walls between them and the blowing sands. (This still stands as the main building, somewhat altered by additions.) The road at that time ran between it and the guest cabins—a straight swath through the resort into the sand dunes. Its faint outline may still be seen from the approach down from Towne Pass.

Newspapers of the day advertised that "Bungalette City" was to be open for business on November 1, 1926. More commonly it was called "Bungalow City." It was only natural, however, that it become known as "Stovepipe Wells Hotel." Now, to avoid confusion, the original waterhole is known as "Old Stovepipe Wells."

Opening day must have been tame as compared to the first social affair. The Eichbaums invited all the old-timers within a hundred miles to be their guests for a grand Thanksgiving Day party. There was to be turkey and all the trimmings. What an interesting guest list it was! Bill Corcoran and his partner, Jack Stewart, came down from Emigrant Wash; Shorty Harris came over from Ballarat with his burros; Ed McSpearin, Bill Ball and Joe Liddick came from Wildrose Canyon; John Cyte hiked over from his cinnebar mine at Chloride Cliffs. The latter had narrowly escaped hanging at Rhyolite some years before, after killing a man who had tried to jump his cinnebar claim. Since that time he was known as "Johnny-behind-the-gun." Lesser

known prospectors came from miles around. Each and every one was warmly welcomed. Most of them took baths for the occasion and dressed in their best clothes. It was a great get-together, and the last one for many of them.

Stovepipe continued to be a favorite rendezvous for the old-timers, and the Eichbaums valued these friendships. Bill Ball came occasionally to visit his old friend, Bob. They enjoyed getting together so much that they sometimes talked through the night. Death Valley Scotty always stopped over on his trips to Los Angeles. Helene Eichbaum was always "Princess" to him. Among other privileges he enjoyed there, he liked to stride into the kitchen and give his orders directly to the cook. Bill Corcoran, who first struck it rich at Rhyolite, was a frequent visitor.

Such associations gave Eichbaum a mining urge that he could not resist. He and Bill Corcoran made a valiant attempt to bring the mines of Skidoo back into production. Three of the Stovepipe tourist cabins were moved up as headquarters while exploratory work was being done. The old Skidoo pipeline had been removed long since, and they found it impractical to continue operations without a water supply.

One memorable experience was when Eichbaum and Scotty decided to jump one of Pete Aguerberry's claims up Scotty's way. Their doubtful justification was that Pete had not kept up his assessment work. Eichbaum was rebuilding the claim's corners while Scotty prepared a tin can for the location notice when, suddenly, they found themselves looking into the end of a double-barreled shotgun. Pete's words, "Now you bums get the hell out of here before I blow you out!", were not needed to start them on their way. As Scotty said later, "I was leavin' that part of the country anyway."

It took time and patience to convince people that Death Valley was an ideal place for a tour. Eichbaum's main selling point was the balmy winter weather. He advertised all accommodations of a high class resort, including baths and running water. Motor stages brought visitors from Los Angeles by way of Mojave, Little Lake, Lone Pine and Darwin. It was an

exhausting trip from the stop at the Dow Hotel in Lone Pine to Stovepipe Wells. The ride down the Zinc Hill road from Darwin was a thrilling one—not always appreciated—and the final pull over Towne Pass was enough to make the traveler happy for any accommodations. Hardy souls who drove their own cars were duly impressed. When T. R. Goodwin, later to become the first superintendent of Death Valley National Monument, made a trip to Death Valley in 1927, it took some careful negotiating back and forth to get his Oakland around some of the curves. The Eichbaums did their best to show visitors an enjoyable time. They advertised: "Pack animals are available with famous old-time prospectors as guides. Thrills of the long ago, minus the dangers and discomforts." Most guests, however, preferred to do their sightseeing in the resort's large Buick sedans.

There must have been times when Eichbaum wondered whether his resort was worth the effort. Securing supplies was an eternal problem in that isolated location. The simplest needs involved great distances and long delays. Most supplies were purchased in Lone Pine. The laundry was done in Beatty. Wells sunk on the property produced a salty water unfit to drink, so all the water for cooking and drinking purposes had to be hauled from Emigrant Springs. It was difficult to keep employees in a place so remote. The usual staff included a clerk, a bellhop, a cook, two waitresses and two guides. Employees took care of the toll gate and gas station as well as driving guests on tours to points of interest. There were also about five maintenance men who kept up the roads. Besides maintaining the toll road, Eichbaum cooperated in keeping the road open from Scotty's Castle and other approaches to his resort.

The first pilgrimage of any size came for Easter sunrise services on March 26, 1927. This was arranged by the Eichbaums, who were well prepared for the occasion. Services were conducted before a large cross set up on the brow of a dune. Benjamin F. Bledsoe, a federal judge, was invited to give the address. He rose to the occasion eloquently. Newspapers de-

lighted in printing dramatic accounts of the scene, where the sun came up over the Funeral Mountains to the strains of *Onward Christian Soldiers*. Many cars made the trip from Los Angeles, in addition to special motor tours. One woman in a party of 29 people wrote an interesting account of her impressions. She said the toll on their seven cars and passengers amounted to over $60.00. Excerpts from her letter follow: "Electric lights at the resort and a searchlight at night throwing its beam over the valley. Place is nice, fine baths, toilets and an army of colored help all dressed in white duck . . . Charge $17.50 per day per couple, three meals and room. Have radio and phonograph . . . all had dinner at the hotel . . . later much laughing and singing songs and general good time. Some played they were '49ers and put the seven cars in a circle with campfire in center—got to bed at midnight."

The success of the sunrise service gave a great boost to tourism in Death Valley. Seeing Death Valley became the thing to do, especially on holidays. On Washington's Birthday, 1930, so many returning cars stopped at the Outpost in Darwin that more than a case of eggs was served—as was all the canned food. Tourists were coming from everywhere in ever increasing numbers. They enjoyed going and returning by different routes, so other roads were being improved. The old "County Road" over Emigrant Canyon was getting more travel. It angled from the canyon across the alluvial fan northeasterly and crossed the Eichbaum road west of the resort. From there it nearly paralleled it for a distance before angling southeastward through the Devil's Cornfield and on to Furnace Creek. Some traveled it to avoid paying toll.

Without warning, tragedy struck at Stovepipe Wells Hotel. Bob Eichbaum was stricken with meningitis. Dr. Frank Ainsley, a friend who was a guest at the time, helped prepare a bed in one of the seven-passenger sedans to transport Eichbaum to Los Angles. Five days later, on February 16, 1932, the colorful life of H. W. Eichbaum came to an end.

Running the resort and keeping up the toll road was a heavy responsibility for a woman who never before had as-

sumed such a role, but Helene Eichbaum measured up to the task. There was little time to be frightened or lonely. Besides carrying on the business, she fed and doctored old-timers in need and helped provide for the local Indians. She could scarcely be blamed if she came to the point of telling weary, hungry and complaining travelers that she was a dancer, not a cook.

Only a year after the death of her husband, Helene Eichbaum saw Death Valley become a national monument. One wonders if she realized how much they had contributed to the recognition of Death Valley's potential.

The decree of distribution of Eichbaum's estate revealed an interesting ownership which seems a clue to dreams that were still unfulfilled. He held title to 80 acres of land on a point overlooking his favorite buttes, between them and Hole-in-the-Rock Spring. The decree also included 135,833 shares in the Emigrant Milling and Mining Co., with its principal place of business at Stovepipe Wells Hotel.

Later owners of the resort discovered, unhappily, that they did not have title to the land they occupied. The acreage sold to them as the resort site was nearly a mile northwest in the next section. With the help of T. R. Goodwin, superintendent of the new Death Valley National Monument, an exchange was arranged to correct the situation.

The toll road had served its purpose. Not only had it provided a direct route out on the west side, but it had opened the way for travel across Death Valley. There had been little freighting over it but a great amount of tourist travel. Eichbaum had not intended or expected to make money on the road. When he was present at the toll gate he never charged local people, but his employees showed no favoritism. Miners, who had to travel the road frequently, resented having to pay toll. This feeling gradually spread as activity in the region increased, until a group of citizens petitioned the Board of Supervisors to purchase the Eichbaum road and discontinue the toll. Communities which had appreciated the road in the beginning now complained that the toll charge was discouraging

travel. It was considered inappropriate to have a toll road as access to a national monument.

The California Division of Highways had been considering the road as a part of Highway 190. Portions of it were very narrow and grades were not of acceptable standards, but no satisfactory alternate route had been found. This spoke well of Eichbaum's foresight in selecting the route. Negotiations with Mrs. Eichbaum resulted in a sale December 19, 1934. The price was $25,000; $24,900 for the toll road and franchise and $100 for the 100 foot easement over the resort property. The state highway route over Towne Pass was not changed except for a section toward the summit on the west side. At the resort, the highway now curves northward around the main building and then takes a route south of the sand dunes. Darwin and the thrilling Zinc Hill road were by-passed in 1937 by the scenic "Darwin cut-off."

The Eichbaum road had served its time. Its place in history is surprisingly large for a road so short in distance—less than 40 miles. It is appropriate today that we honor this road and pay tribute to Bob Eichbaum as the man of vision who created it.

NOTE: If the Eichbaum toll road had still existed during the 1969 Death Valley Encampment, the tolls for travel over Towne Pass would have amounted to approximately $9000.